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ABSTRACT

Two longitudinal field studies of the process of information dissemination through newspapers were conducted on two different public affairs topics (regional planning and routing of a high voltage power line) in four communities to examine the role of newspapers in increasing levels of conflict and in creating greater levels of awareness and understanding of issues relating to collective concerns within the community. Two principal hypotheses were investigated: (1) That as a community issue develops, adult citizens in the general population tend to get their first information from newspapers (or other mass media) rather than from personal contacts or sources; and (2) that the higher the level of conflict surrounding an issue in a community the higher the level of citizen familiarity and knowledge concerning that issue. Each study involved two phases of interviewing general population samples about a half year apart, with varying levels of newspaper coverage of topics in between. Rural areas with other areas which were more urban and pluralistic were also compared. The studies supported the first hypothesis and were generally supportive of the second. A sequential pattern of media coverage was also identified that may be common in regional issues and therefore relevant to programs of adult education about public affairs. (TA)

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# NEWSPAPERS AND ADULT UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS: Two longitudinal community studies

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# NEWSPAPERS AND ADULT UNDERSTANDING OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS:
## Two longitudinal community studies

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A persistent concern in American communities is the problem of reaching citizens with information about matters vital to their individual and collective welfare. There is a deeply ingrained belief that in a participatory democracy, citizens should be encouraged to acquire as much information about public decisions as possible.

There is also frequent concern about the fact that community development programs frequently involve intense conflict, raising the question of whether such conflict may be an information-impeding factor. 1/ Yet, social conflict is a basic variable in community change and may bear a close functional relationship to the diffusion of information. 2/ Furthermore, conflict is often closely linked to activity of newspapers and other information media that deliver information to citizens. 3/

This is a report of a longitudinal study of the process of information dissemination through newspapers, on two different public affairs topics, in four communities. Findings are based upon participant observation of events, interviews with news sources and journalists, and interviews with samples of local citizens. The purpose of the study is to examine the role of newspapers in increasing levels of conflict and in creating greater levels of awareness and understanding of issues relating to collective concerns within the community.

### Conflict and communication

While many writers view conflict as a negative condition in communities, we suggest that it may be viewed as either positive or negative. Conflict may be seen as a necessary process but not a sufficient condition for mass diffusion of information, especially in situations where the goal is widespread distribution of knowledge to a general population.

Several scholars representing the social conflict school of thought have referred to the role of conflict in arousing and maintaining citizen involvement and interest. 4/ Conflict within a system can lead to revitalization of old norms or emergence of new ones. Conflict with an external group may, in addition, strengthen internal cohesion. Such consequences all imply an increase in communication, such as through newspapers and other mass media.

The analysis of community conflict, and its implications for adult understanding of issues is especially important in a period of time when communities increasingly find themselves with steadily shrinking power to control their own destinies. Since World War II, the role of such external agencies as state and

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federal government has become increasingly important in school aid, transportation, urban development and social welfare. Similarly, local business and utility decisions are more and more under the control of corporations with headquarters elsewhere. With decisions shifting to regional, state and national levels, communities and interest groups within them have special needs for knowledge. To influence decisions about their futures, they may seek power through new forms of social organization. Acquisition of social power requires communication about the substance of the issue and about the nature of organizing and taking group action.

## Hypotheses under study

Two principal hypotheses are under investigation in this analysis.

The first is that as a community issue develops, adult citizens in the general population tend to get their first information from newspapers (or other mass media) rather than from personal contacts or sources. This hypothesis frequently supported in studies of diffusion of information about farming practices and consumer goods, should also apply to knowledge about community-wide issues. 5/

Basically, this hypothesis assumes that mass media at the local level, particularly newspapers, tend to accelerate attention to issues which have already been defined and initiated by organizations and agencies both within the community and external to it. Newspapers and other mass media do not ordinarily generate new ideas themselves, nor do they ordinarily initiate social conflicts or other forms of social change. Newspapers generally have neither the resources for such initiation nor the institutionalized belief that initiation of collective action is their prescribed community role. They may view themselves as stimulators of thought or as advocates of programs already under way, as has been demonstrated in several studies. But they do not serve as initial creators of ideas or action programs. Particularly in the small, homogeneous community, the newspaper is likely to be seen as a vehicle for reporting (and frequently, promoting) plans that have already been decided upon in leadership groups. 6/ Or if an external agency or organization initiates activity which may be seen as threatening to the community, the newspaper serves a surveillance function in alerting the community to that action. But in so alerting the community, the newspaper is generally likely to interpret the external act according to local norms and according to definitions already created in local organizations. The newspaper may add to those definitions, but it is generally unlikely to establish new ones.

The second hypothesis is that the higher the level of conflict surrounding an issue in a community, the higher the level of citizen familiarity and knowledge concerning that issue. This hypothesis follows directly from the principle that conflict is a stimulator of both information and attention to the issue. As the intensity of a conflict increases, interpersonal communication about the topic increases, arousing more interest and more self-exposure to all sources of information. The conflict-discussion relationship was found empirically in earlier studies. 7/ Increased discussion may stimulate further media attention, as the issue grows in an upward spiral. There is the further assumption, underlying this hypothesis, that the level of conflict surrounding the topic is related to the issue's potential for arousing basic concerns within the community. A "basic concern" might be illustrated by a community's attachment to a way of life or by its dependence upon a particular industry for economic sustenance.

## Issues under study

These hypotheses were studied in two longitudinal study situations that approximate a "natural" experiment. The issues selected for study are two that highlight the dependence of the community upon decision-making processes that are controlled by the larger system. These issues are regional planning in one area of Minnesota and routing of a high voltage power line across another area of the state. They are similar issues in terms of principles of social organization and power relationships. Both involve the interdependent relationship of local communities with external forces and agencies, public and private. Both issues draw attention to the fact that what is good for one community is not necessarily good for other communities or for society as a whole.

Regional planning was studied in two communities. One is Region Town, with a population under 2,000, which was once a farm service center but is now partly a bedroom community for commuting workers. Nearby townships are largely dominated by farming, and the entire area is served by a weekly paper with editorial offices in Region Town. The other community is Region City, population near 30,000, which is a transportation and small-scale manufacturing center with a number of different ethnic groupings, four-year colleges and more than 1,000 places of business. It is served by a daily newspaper and, compared with many cities of its size, Region City has a decidedly urban atmosphere.

In 1969, the state legislature provided for creation of Regional Development Commissions (RDC's), one of which represents a multi-county region in which the two study communities are located. A specific responsibility of an RDC is to prepare a plan for the region. Proposals for state and federal funding for projects within the region would be prepared, adopted, and forwarded through the Commission which has an advisory and coordinating role. While the RDC was being organized, another organization represented about half of the counties in this region, including Region Town and Region City. At the time of the first study (May 1974) this sub-region organization was considering an ecology project. It contracted that September with the RDC to provide technical assistance for the five sub-region counties, thereby dropping efforts to become a competing individual planning organization and eliminating overlap and potential conflict with the Regional Commission.

## Media coverage of regional planning

Prior to the first interviews, regional planning was mentioned in only 8 articles in the newspapers of the two communities, only one of which was on a front page (table 1). These articles dealt largely with organizational activity, funding problems, the sub-region ecology project and office location. When the first study was conducted, there was potential for a public conflict between the sub-region organization and the full RDC. The Region City daily did carry eight articles about the sub-region organization alone between early May and November, when the second study was conducted. None, however, was on page 1 and all were brief, covering only rather routine events. The Region Town weekly carried only one article on the sub-region organization in the May-November period between the first and second interviews. The anticipated heavy publicity and public controversy, about regional planning and the competing organizations, did not develop between the first and second interview studies.

## The power line issue

The power line study also involved two areas. One is in a rural county near and including Area Town, population under 2,500, an agricultural trade and service center with relatively few residents commuting to other cities for work. The town has a weekly newspaper that circulates locally and in surrounding farm areas. This area also covered several rural townships northwest of Area Town and other townships to the east; all of these rural townships are largely agricultural and relatively homogeneous in ethnic background.

The other study area is in a metropolitan county, including Metville with a population of about 6,000 suburban residents and Metfield, with 3,000 persons living mostly on farms and former farmsteads. Metville and Metfield have more total population, a higher concentration of young people, more places of business and a wider variety of professions and occupations than Area Town. Metville and Metfield are served by two jointly-owned weekly papers which carry much of the same news.

The power line issue later led to open confrontations between farm groups and surveyors for the line. Although both waves of interviews preceded those particular confrontations, the possibility of such occurences was clear throughout the study period, since controversy was one of the reasons for choosing these topics and study areas. The first wave of interviews in both counties was in September, 1975, and the second wave was in February, 1976.

In winter 1975, the power utility cooperatives requested land owners to sign easements for a high voltage power line which would run across portions of the state, including part of Area county and Metro county. Organizations of farmers and others opposed to the line had formed during the initial period. In April, 1975, the two power cooperatives applied to a state agency to select a corridor for the line, under the state Power Plant Siting Act of 1974. The state agency then scheduled a series of public hearings, following which a 20-mile-wide corridor was established.

These hearings were held in July and early August, 1975, in nine different communities in areas where corridors had been proposed. They took on characteristics of adversary proceedings, with the power cooperatives and opposition groups both represented by attorneys. Technical experts, local officials and citizens spoke or testified at different locations, with considerable cross-examination of witnesses by attorneys and much debate over certain questions: Would the lines be harmful to agriculture? Would they threaten human health? Could the lines be put underground? Much debate occurred over scientific and technical evidence. One hearing was picketed by local adults and children carrying signs expressing strong opposition and open hostility to the power line. Several signs characterized the power lines as fulfilling needs of big cities at farmers' expense.

There was especially strong opposition to the power line in townships northwest of Area Town where there had been discussions about acquisition of easements even before the Power Cooperatives asked the state agency to designate a corridor. At a hearing in Metville, the dominant concerns were impact on residential areas and hearing procedure itself, including the fact that end points of the line had been fixed before the corridor hearings began.

In mid-September, 1975, a citizens' advisory committee recommended to the state agency that the corridor be diverted, missing much of the agricultural area under dispute. On October 3, 1975, the state agency designated a corridor that accepted most of the area proposed by the hearing officer, but sharply opposed by farmers and suburban residents and not in accord with several recommendations of the advisory committee.

The first interviews were conducted between September 18 and October 2, 1975, just before the corridor designation. A short time later, the power cooperatives applied to another state agency for a certificate of need, emphasizing a projected increase in demand for electrical power by their rural consumer members. The certificate of need had not yet been issued when the second wave of interviews was conducted between February 10 and the end of February, 1976. Hearings, however, had been held, both on the certificate of need and on specific routes for the line. In late January, 1976, the state agency specified certain routes that the power line could take within the larger corridor areas, routes similar to those proposed by the cooperatives. Those routes went through the rural northwest of Area Town and crossed both Metfield and Metville.

## Media coverage of the power line issue

Compared with regional planning, the power line question received considerable publicity in weekly newspapers serving both rural and suburban study areas (table 1). Whereas regional planning publicity centered around rather routine reports, the power line coverage was characterized by a heavy tone of opposition to the power line, to the procedure for locating it and to interpretations of scientific evidence favoring the line. Weekly newspapers treated the issue as a conflict between local farmers and the power cooperatives, with little or no mention of differences in views or positions within the respective communities.

Before the first interviews, the Area Town weekly devoted rather large amounts of space to background feature articles on technical issues, such as impact on health (especially from ozone), the effects on farming, and feasibility of underground installation. The weekly also reported acts of opposition groups, and the progress of the corridor hearing process. The Area City daily, which circulates throughout the county, concentrated on acts of agencies and opposition groups. The suburban weeklies got much of their information from state agency releases, from a member of the citizens' advisory committee, and from opposition groups in other counties.

After the first survey, coverage shifted from technical arguments about the safety of the line to procedures for locating it, specific line routing, and to opposition. A metropolitan daily editorial emphasized the need for electrical power and the Area City daily editorially stressed the need to complete the routing process. Meanwhile, the Area Town weekly, along with other weeklies along the corridor route, emphasized and editorially supported the opposition.

Regional development and the power line issue, while raising many similar questions, represent sharp contrasts in social organization, events, and media coverage. Regional planning was largely at the initiating and organizing stages, and was treated as low key by newspapers. The power line topic, however, quickly took on dimensions of an intense issue within the respective regions, as opposition groups formed, first to deal with technical issues and then with procedure and organized counteraction involving protests and legal measures.

Strong editorial positions were taken, with community newspaper editorials questioning the procedure and the good faith of the state agencies and the power cooperatives, and larger daily papers treating the opposition as a minority with concerns that were legitimate but not sufficient to stop the line routing and construction.

Whereas a major source of potential controversy in the regional development issue was defused when the sub-region organization was relegated to a technical assistance role, opposition and conflict was a continuing and escalating ingredient of the power line topic, both before the first interviews and between the first and second.

## Interviewing and samples

In both areas, survey respondents were chosen by area probability sampling procedures and were interviewed in their homes by interviewers trained for this project. The first and second interviews in each case were conducted among different but equivalent samples, selected by the same procedures. Reporters and sources of news articles were interviewed between the first and second surveys of the general population.

## How do the media approach the topics?

One assumption of this study is that newspapers tend to accelerate attention to issues which have already been defined and initiated by organizations and agencies within the community or external to it. The evidence from the reporter and news source interviews is consistent with this assumption, in that members of agencies and organizations were the primary, and frequently the only sources of information for newspaper articles on the two topics.

There was, however, a clear difference in reporter initiative in the two topics. Reporters took a great deal of initiative in reporting the power line, in a way that apparently did not occur for regional planning. News sources quoted in articles about the power line indicated that all except one of 21 news articles before the first study were "the paper's idea" rather than a suggestion from someone else. By comparison, the majority of reporters and sources involved in coverage of regional planning indicated that media contacts on that topic had been initiated mostly by public officials.

There was also a difference in the way the issues were regarded by the news sources. On the regional development issue, evidence suggests that organizational activity had not progressed to where there was belief among reporters or sources that regional planning was a matter of high concern. When asked to rank topics including regional planning, news sources picked land use and county government as most important, and reporters tended to name urban renewal. While all of these topics may have regional planning implications, the specific issue rather than the general process was seen as more crucial, especially among journalists. In the power line study, by contrast, the reporters clearly saw the topic as a major one. Three of the six reporters interviewed ranked the power line topic as first in importance among five suggested, and only one ranked it lower than second. Also, all six reporters said they thought rural people would rank the power line topic as most important.

Apparently, the specific characteristics of the power line issue attracted reporters to it, and their efforts were reinforced by a heavy flow of letters to editors and other responses. Mass media often focus on specific situations and events that dramatize issues, rather than on basic public affairs principles and more abstract philosophies. Regional planning in the Region City area might well receive heavy publicity if a particular event or set of events and conflicts were to dramatize the basic underlying issues. In a northern Minnesota community, for example, regional planning received little public attention for a number of years even though there had been a long period of organized activity among agencies and development groups. Then in 1975-76 a development proposal for a specific tract of land abruptly became front-page news, both locally and in newspapers that circulate statewide. The proposed project highlighted many of the central questions of regional planning.

## What people know

The differences in levels of media attention to the issues are reflected in the differing levels of familiarity and understanding which respondents expressed on regional planning and the power line issue. In neither the first nor the second interviews on regionalism did more than 8 percent have any accurate knowledge about the purpose of the regional development commissions and no more than 5 percent knew how the commissions were funded (table 2). Furthermore, low as these levels are, they tended to decline even more in the second interviews when not a single respondent in Region City knew the commission's purpose. 9/ The highest specific knowledge on the topic was on the sub-region organization; 12 percent in Region City had some accurate knowledge about it in the first study. But again, familiarity dropped sharply (to 3 percent) in the second interview, after the sub-region agency had been absorbed quietly into the larger one.

Between a fourth and a third had some accurate information on "revenue sharing," which is a related concept but which had not been tied directly to regional planning activities in any publicity; it had been a separate political issue.

In spite of the lack of knowledge about specifics, at least a fifth of the citizens saw the regional planning issue as "very important" and a third or more said "yes" when asked if it was a "touchy subject," a question designed to measure the intensity in the conflict.

The power line issue, by comparison, is characterized by higher levels of general familiarity, by higher rated importance and by higher levels of perceived conflict in the rural and open country areas than occurred with regional planning. Proportion having some accurate knowledge about the power line varied from a low of a third or less in the suburban community to a high of 70 percent or more in the most directly affected rural area (table 3).

However, even with the continuing heavy publicity, overall levels of measured knowledge on the power line topic did not increase between the first and second interviews. On specific aspects, there were slight increases on percent hearing about effects on health in all except the suburban community. On other aspects, including effects of agriculture, underground installation, names of utilities and names or organizations opposed, there were as many declines as increases in familiarity.

This finding may lead to a modification of the conflict hypothesis. While conflict increases awareness of a topic, it may not necessarily lead to increased understanding of the underlying issues in the population at large. A possibly important explanatory factor in the power line case is that as the issue progressed, the newspaper coverage shifted to some extent from concentration on the scientific and technical aspects to concentration on procedure and legal opposition. The conflict itself, as a conflict, became the story. Accordingly, the percent calling the topic a "touchy subject" increased in four of the five study areas, particularly in the rural townships most directly affected.

## Importance and collective self-interest

Importance of the power line topic, and perceived conflict as measured by the "touchy subject" question, differ sharply across community areas. In both counties, the highest importance ratings were in open country locations and the lowest, particularly in the second study, were in the communities with more concentrated populations. The percent saying "very important" in Metfield jumped from 22 percent in the first study to 46 percent in the second; a key event between the first and second studies was a public meeting in Metfield of opposition groups. Again, visible organizational activity is a key event in public arousal. Similarly, there is an increase from 32 percent to 42 percent in importance rating in the rural area east of Area Town and a consistently high rating northwest of there, where opposition had initially been high and where relevance was high. One of the most striking aspects of table 3 is the pattern of responses that the issue "affects me directly." The percentage was above 40 percent in both phases in the northwest area; in Metfield, it jumped from 22 to 46 percent (almost perfectly paralleling the increase in importance) after the opposition organized.

The differences in perceived importance of the issue in Metfield and Metville reflect differences in community structure. In the open country areas of Metfield, because of the lower degree of diversity, a problem of one rural section is more likely to be seen as a problem by all the people in the area. In Metville, however, the greater population size and diversity means that the power line issue was more likely to be submerged amid a variety of concerns and less likely to dominate public attention.

In the city of Area Town itself, the percentage rating the power line issue as "very important" dropped from 17 to 13 percent. This is especially noteworthy, since the Area Town weekly, read by more than 90 percent of Area Town respondents, gave heavy attention to the issue and editorially opposed the power cooperatives. This indicates that heavy media coverage of an issue does not by itself ensure that people will see an issue as important; judgments of importance also depend on how the issue is related to community self-interest. In this case, it appears that as time progressed, rural residents increasingly viewed the issue as a general rural area concern of individual rights, while town residents in the time span studied saw it in a quite different light. The town citizen may be more likely to see the problem as primarily one of energy needs, as might the urban citizen. The fact that the large urban media entered the reporting later, and editorialized as they did, seems to reflect this difference in problem definition. Such a similarity between small town residents and the urban perspective may suggest that non-metropolitan vs. metropolitan differences may have a parallel in local farm-town divisions. Just as outstate Minnesotans tend to see things differently than Twin Cities residents, so may similar differences exist at the local level between town and rural citizens.

## Where people get information

In both regional planning and the power line studies, respondents who indicated they had heard of the topic were asked: "Where have you seen or heard about this topic? Has it been from other persons, from television news, from radio news, from newspaper articles, or where?" Most of the sources mentioned were either newspapers or other persons, or a combination, reflecting the fact that publicity on both issues in the period of time studied was dominated by newspaper articles. The power line issue had not yet become a major television topic; television coverage started rather abruptly about four months after the second interviews, after the topic had been heavily covered locally and in the printed media.

One of the hypotheses under study is that as a community issue develops, citizens tend to get their first information from newspapers or other mass media rather than initially from personal contacts or sources. The evidence is strongly supportive of that proposition (figure 1).

On the regional planning topic, the proportion citing newspapers, although quite low, is nevertheless higher in both communities and in both studies than the proportion mentioning hearing it from other persons.

The most striking support for the hypothesis is in results from the power line issues, where total attention was much higher. In four of the five communities, the responses in the first interviews indicate that percent seeing it in newspapers is higher than percent hearing about it from other persons by at least 22 percentage points. The one important exception is in the directly affected area northwest of Area Town, where the issue was already the dominant topic of conversation in the first interview. In that area, organizational activity had been high and there had been extensive contact among individuals concerning the issue; the relationship to local self-interest had already been discussed.

In the second interviews, the source of information patterns are different. The percent talking to others about the issue more nearly equalled the percent hearing about it in papers. In all areas except the northwest, the amount of information from newspapers stays roughly the same, while percent naming other persons increases. In Metfield, percent mentioning "other persons" jumped from 14 percent in the first study to 44 percent in the second, even though percent naming newspapers dropped slightly, from 54 to 49 percent. In the area east of Area Town, the increase in naming "other persons" was from 15 to 52 percent, so that in the second study, proportions are identical for the two sources. Seeking information from newspapers increased sharply in only one area, northwest of Area Town, where it went from 52 to 80 percent.

This pattern may typify information seeking and receiving for a variety of public affairs topics in communities such as these. People often get first word of events through the media, unless those events are of such a localized nature that first-hand reports from other persons come rapidly such as in a local catastrophe. Most rural residents in the places east of Area Town, who may have been less likely to have friends or relatives directly involved with power line negotiations in earlier months, apparently got their first information by reading about it. But as the issue developed over time with the accompanying conflict and implications for the rural area became more widely publicized, the matter became a topic for interpersonal communication. Newspaper reading, however,

did not fall off the results suggest that newspaper coverage may have contributed to the way people defined the issue as it developed and may have reinforced, if not maintained, the levels of discussion. In some cases, conversation can stimulate increased reading, as may well have occurred in the northwest townships. There, general involvement increased to a point where people may have sought still further information wherever they could find it.

## Knowledge and what people read

Given the fact that different newspapers covered the power line issue in different ways, would knowledge (and opinions) differ according to what people read? As indicated earlier, local weekly newspapers covered this topic more heavily than did daily newspapers and also editorially opposed the line. The Area City and Metropolitan daily newspaper coverage, on the other hand, was limited to more specific events surrounding opposition and conflict, such as coverage of the picketing at a hearing, legal moves and acts of agencies. The daily newspapers carried editorials that acknowledged problems with the decision making process but nevertheless supported eventual construction of the line. In so doing the dailies clearly defined their priorities and at the same time reinforced the belief of rural populations that material comforts for urban dwellers rather than rights of local people were the major concerns of urban area spokespersons.

Knowledge and opinions do differ according to which newspaper is read (table 4). In the suburban sample, the highest level of accurate knowledge of the power line issue (46 percent) is among those who read the local weekly but did not read a metropolitan daily. Also, according to an opinion scale, these respondents tended to be least favorable to the power line, compared with Metro county respondents who read metropolitan dailies or did not read the local weekly. In the suburban area, knowing much about the issue depended to a considerable extent upon whether one read the local weekly.

The difference in editorial treatment of the issue is reflected in reader response. The daily newspapers were more supportive of the power line than was the Area Town weekly. In Area county, the highest knowledge is among those who read both the local weekly and the Area City daily, and the lowest knowledge is among those who do not read the Area Town weekly at all. Also, support for the power line in Area county is lowest among those who read the Area Town weekly but not the Area City daily.

These findings have extensive theoretical implications in connection with the "Agenda Setting" function of newspapers, which is defined frequently as one of telling readers not what to think, but what to think about. 10/ The results here suggest that both consequences may occur in a conflict situation in which the newspaper finds itself constrained to take a position on the basis of local community support or personal involvement of the editor.

## Conflict and knowledge

The second proposition under study is that the higher the level of conflict surrounding an issue in a community, the higher the level of citizen familiarity and knowledge concerning that issue. The test of that proposition requires a re-examination of data on the "touchy subject" question for the power line issue, in table 3.

Findings are generally supportive of the hypothesis, in the sense that in those areas where the subject is more likely to be viewed as "touchy" (and therefore more intensely controversial) knowledge on all counts tends to be highest. For example, the suburban sample, Metville, was among the least likely to term the issue a "touchy subject"; that community also displayed the lowest level of knowledge on all aspects -- general, health, agriculture, underground installation and names of organizations and utilities. On the other hand, levels of knowledge on all of those aspects was highest in the rural area northwest of Area Town where 52 percent in the first wave and 83 percent in the second called it "touchy."

The relationship across all five community areas can be seen graphically by plotting the percentages on the "touchy subject" question against level of familiarity or knowledge. The relationship may be illustrated for percent who have heard of underground installation, as seen in figure 2. While the relationship is not perfectly linear, the clear tendency in both the first and second waves is for knowledge to be higher in areas where the topic is seen as more controversial. Furthermore, the line becomes straighter, and the differences in knowledge are more extreme, in the second wave of studies when the topic was seen as more touchy in all except one of the five areas.

It is also important to point out that conflict is important as a structural condition rather than as a personal perspective. In fact, if the percent saying "affects me directly" and percent calling the topic a "touchy subject" are plotted against each other, the result is a U-shaped curve for both the first and the second interviews. They are different dimensions and the data indicate that perception of conflict is a more important factor in stimulating attention to the issue than is perceived direct effect. Residents of Metville, the more densely populated suburb, saw the issue as affecting them more directly than did the rural residents east of Area Town. Yet, the rural respondents saw more of the conflict dimension and were generally more aware of all aspects of the issue.

Conflict is a variable structural condition of a system under stress, and relates to organizational activity, community structure, and media activity. The comparison between the regional planning topic and the course of events in the power line issue make it clear that media coverage is a prime factor in accelerating attention to an issue. Once the issue becomes widely known, however, the media do not determine precisely how it will be defined in each community. Even though there is some relationship between individual newspapers which people read and their opinions, as indicated above, it is important to emphasize that residents of Area Town saw the issue as far less important than did residents of the affected area and of the unaffected rural area as well. However, Area Town residents <u>did</u> see conflict in the issue, initially, to a greater extent than all except the most directly affected farmers.

## Summary

The relationship of newspapers as communication elements to levels of information and interpersonal communication about public affairs is illustrated in two field studies. Data point to the newspaper's key role in <u>acceleration</u> of an issue and in creating familiarity with it. Issue <u>initiation</u>, however, does not ordinarily start with newspapers or other media, but stems from prior organized activity.

Each study involves two phases of interviewing general population samples about a half year apart, with varying levels of newspaper coverage of topics in between. Also, each study compared rural areas with other areas which are more urban and pluralistic.

Findings support the hypothesis that except for areas most immediately affected by an issue, citizens tend to get their first information about public controversies from newspapers. They continue to follow the story in print at a fairly even rate, while increasing discussion with others as publicity continues.

In one study area, proportion discussing a major topic in the news, the power line issue, jumped from 15 percent in the first interview to 52 percent in the second. Level of citizen information about opposing organizations increased in this period more than did level of understanding of scientific and technical aspects of the issue. These findings are contrasted with another community study on regional planning, in which anticipated heavy publicity and development of conflict did not occur, resulting in a decline in familiarity over a five-month period.

Also, the study identifies a sequential pattern of media coverage that may be quite common in regional issues and therefore highly relevant to programs of adult education about public affairs. Local newspapers were first to publicize the power line issue heavily, with metropolitan dailies picking it up later and metropolitan television stations reporting it last of all, when it already had the dimensions of a statewide issue. This sequence of media coverage reflects functions and capacities of different media in different kinds of communities.

Finally, the study supports the hypothesis, based upon conflict theory, that citizen understanding of both organizational and technical aspects of an issue will be higher in areas where the topic is surrounded by the more intense conflict. This level of conflict is related to structural characteristics of the community, the perceived direct relevance of the topic, and to media coverage itself.

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4. See L.A. Coser, The Functions of Social Conflict, Free Press, N.Y., 1956; R. Dahrendorf, Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1959; and L.A. Coser, Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict, Free Press, N.Y., 1967.

5. E.M. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, Free Press, N.Y., 1962, p. 98ff.

6. Alex Edelstein and J. Blaine Schulz, "The Leadership role of the weekly newspaper as seen by community leaders: A sociological perspective," in L.A. Dexter and D.M. White, People, Society and Mass Communications, Free Press, N.Y., 1963.

7. G.A. Donohue, P.J. Tichenor and C.N. Olien, "Mass media and the knowledge gap: A hypothesis reconsidered," Communication Research, vol. 2, January, 1975, pp. 3-23.


8. There were six reporters and six public officials interviewed in the regional planning study. In the power line study, six reporters and 14 news sources were interviewed.

9. Such declines in public awareness may have some direct implications for concentration of social power. When public information available on such a basic issue is at so low a level, the situation allows for a greater degree of professional dominance, without extensive participation by the general public.


10. M.E. McCombs and D.L. Shaw, "The agenda-setting function of mass media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36, 1972, pp. 176-187.

TABLE 1

Newspaper Coverage of Regional Planning and Power Line Issues

| | Regional Planning | | Power Line | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Region Town Weekly | Region City Daily | Area Town Weekly | Metville-Metfield Weekly | Area City Daily | Metro Dailies |
| Three month period before first survey | | | | | | |
| Total items | 2 | 6 | 14 | 8 | 7 | 3 |
| Items on p. 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 0 |
| Items on editorial page | 1 | - | 2 | 1 | - | - |
| Time of first survey | May 1-20, 1974 | | September 18 - October 2, 1975 | | | |
| Period between first and second surveys | | | | | | |
| Total items | 2 | 9 | 11 | 15 | 12 | 2 |
| Items on p. 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 5 | 0 |
| Items on editorial page | - | - | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| Time of second survey | November 4-20, 1974 | | February 10-25, 1976 | | | |

TABLE 2

Specific Items of Knowledge about Regional Planning

| | Region City 1st | 2nd | Region Town 1st | 2nd |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percent who: | | | | |
| Have any accurate knowledge about "RDC" purpose. | 8% | 0% | 7% | 2% |
| Know how "RDC" is funded. | 4% | 2% | 5% | 3% |
| Have any accurate information on "revenue sharing". | 28% | 23% | 33% | 28% |
| Have any accurate knowledge about "sub-region organization" purpose. | 12% | 3% | 3% | 2% |
| Rate issue as "very important". | 22% | 29% | 20% | 20% |
| Call topic a "touchy subject". | 33% | 39% | 36% | 33% |

FIGURE 1

Percent Getting Information from Newspapers and from Talking with Other Persons

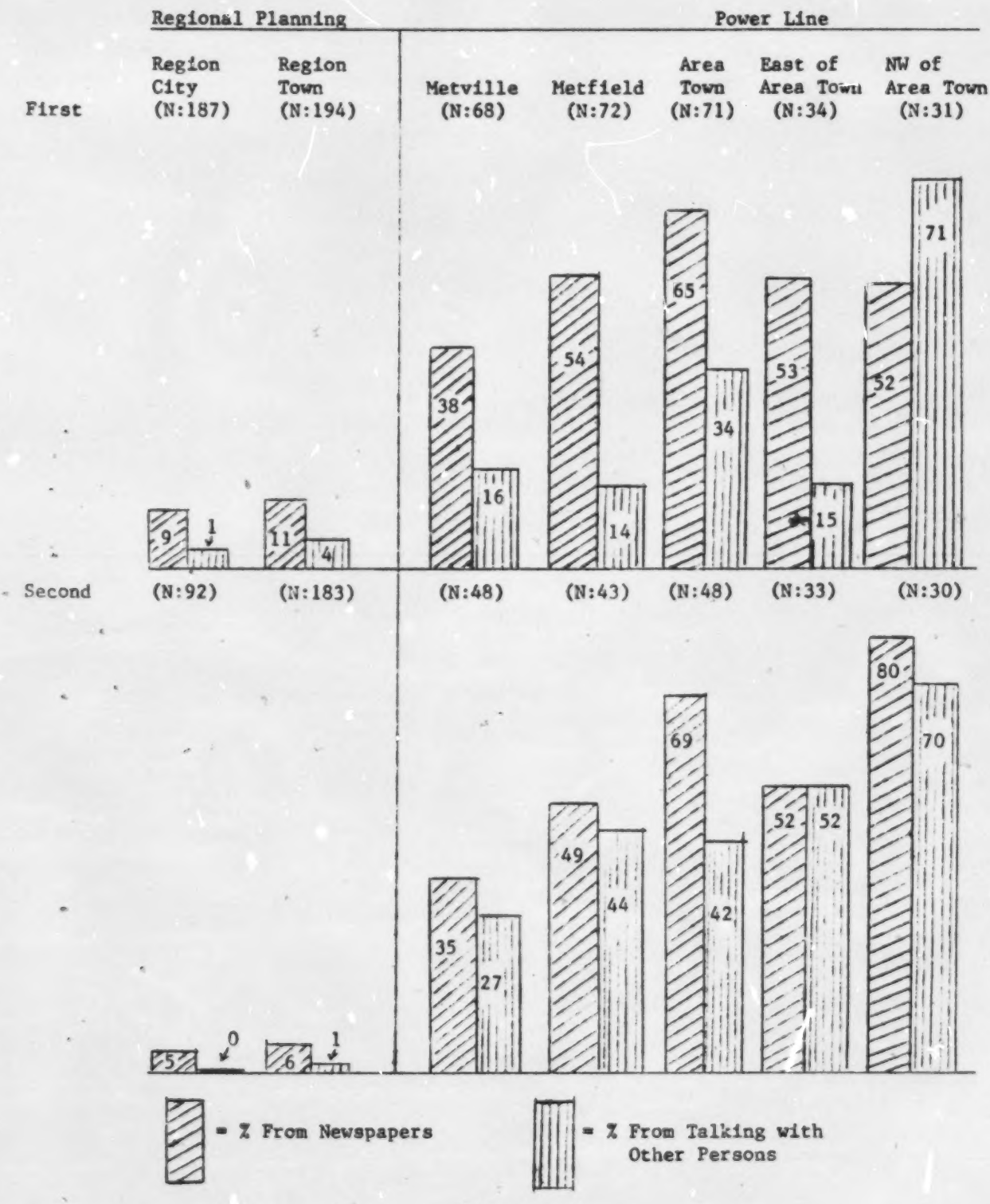

TABLE 3

Specific Items of Knowledge and Opinions about the Power Line Issue

| Knowledge and Familiarity | Metville | | Metfield | | Area Town | | Rural, east of Area Town | | Rural, NW of Area Town | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percent who: | 1st | 2nd | 1st | 2nd | 1st | 2nd | 1st | 2nd | 1st | 2nd |
| Have any accurate knowledge about the power line. | 33% | 25% | 49% | 49% | 62% | 46% | 65% | 67% | 74% | 70% |
| Have heard of effects on health. | 16% | 8% | 25% | 26% | 14% | 29% | 35% | 39% | 55% | 67% |
| Have heard of effects on agriculture. | 21% | 8% | 26% | 23% | 25% | 42% | 44% | 48% | 71% | 70% |
| Have heard of underground installation. | 28% | 8% | 28% | 30% | 32% | 29% | 41% | 36% | 68% | 73% |
| Know names of utilities. | 4% | 0% | 7% | 9% | 8% | 2% | 3% | 12% | 15% | 24% |
| Know organizations opposed. | 6% | 2% | 8% | 23% | 14% | 6% | 12% | 15% | 55% | 47% |
| Say issue is "very important". | 18% | 21% | 22% | 46% | 17% | 13% | 32% | 42% | 61% | 64% |
| Say issue "affects me directly". | 31% | 25% | 22% | 44% | 14% | 10% | 18% | 12% | 45% | 43% |
| Call topic a "touchy subject." | 21% | 23% | 19% | 51% | 44% | 33% | 29% | 36% | 52% | 83% |

FIGURE 2

Percent Calling Power Line Issue a "Touchy Subject" and Percent Familiar with Underground Installation in Five Sample Areas

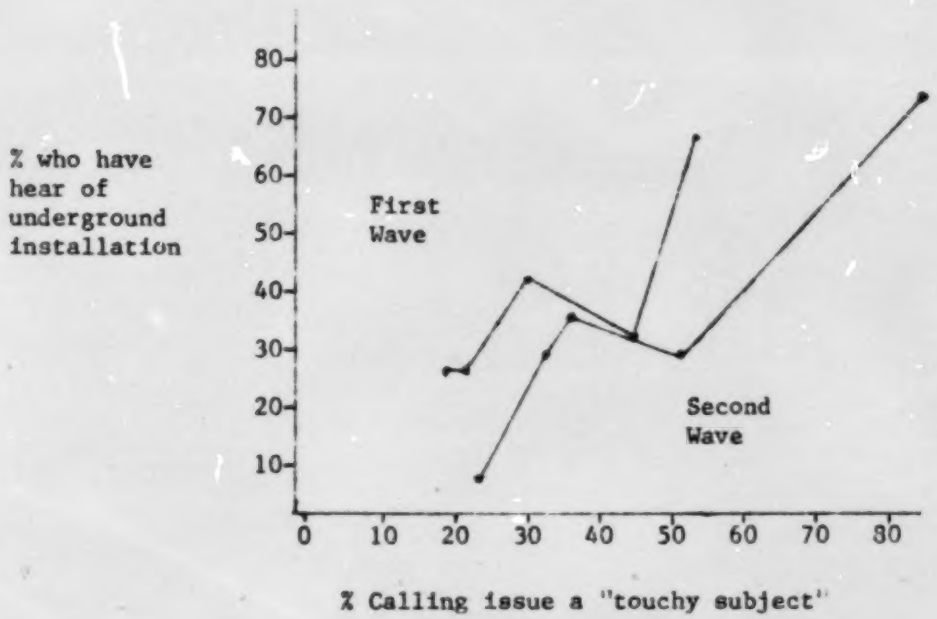

TABLE 4

Knowledge and Opinions about Power Line, According to Newspaper Reading

(Second study only)

| | Percent who: | |
|---|---|---|
| | Have any accurate knowledge | Are "high" on pro-power line scale |
| Metro county sample | | |
| Reads Metville or Metfield weekly, but no metropolitan daily (24) | 46% | 50% |
| Reads Metville or Metfield weekly and also reads metropolitan daily (7) | 14% | 71% |
| Does not read the Metville or Metfield weekly (60) | 7% | 70% |
| Area county sample | | |
| Reads Area Town weekly, but no Area City or metropolitan daily (44) | 39% | 45% |
| Reads Area Town weekly and also reads Area City or metropolitan daily (15) | 53% | 60% |
| Does not read the Area Town weekly (52) | 21% | 60% |